The School is Before the Church: A History of Catholic Dissent During and Following the Great School Controversy in New York, 1840-1870

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I. Why So Serious? An Introduction to the Circumstances of American Immigration, Education, and Religious Policies in the Mid-Nineteenth Century

In his 1840 address to the New York State legislature, the Whig Governor William Seward introduced an educational plan that would have radically altered the system of primary education throughout the state. In an attempt to increase the number of children regularly attending school, especially immigrant children, Seward proposed to extend state education funds to Catholic schools. While few could argue with his intention to fight poverty and reduce the increasing number of loitering youths through increased education, many New Yorkers balked at their tax dollars supporting institutions that taught a particular religion.

Disagreements over how to best address the growing number of delinquent children in New York polarized New Yorkers and Americans nationwide. Though Catholic schools never achieved their ambition of receiving state school funds, this battle reshaped public education policy within the city, the state, and eventually the nation. The controversy also led to a political drama the likes of which political novelists dream.

By the time the dust had settled in this battle, a number of extraordinary events had transpired. The Catholic archbishop of New York, John Hughes, debated the leaders of the public education system of New York in front of the city council. In response to election results, rioters pelted Archbishop Hughes' house with stones. Perhaps most remarkable, Archbishop Hughes declared his intention to burn New York to the ground if a nativist mob harmed a Catholic church. Indeed, the raging debate, in the words of

historian Diane Ravitch, came to be known as one of "the Great School Wars" of New York City.[1]

Why were such angry passions aroused by this attempt to reform the system? In many ways, the changes suggested by Governor Seward encapsulated the numerous growing rifts within American society. Americans of many backgrounds and interests found that they had some stake in the outcome. For example, Protestants detested their tax dollars being used to spread Catholicism, while New Yorkers throughout the state feared government intrusion into education, which had traditionally been a local matter. Also, supporters of the old education system, which was managed by a private entity known as the Public School Society, feared its demise and replacement by a less effective system. Moreover, nativists feared that a large Catholic school system would effectively put America under the thumb of the Pope, as they believed Catholic Europe to be.[2]

Historians from different backgrounds place this event within many historical narratives. Vincent Lannie authored the most thorough, blow-by-blow account of the conflict in his book, *Public Money and Parochial Education; Bishop Hughes, Governor Seward, and the New York School Controversy*. His book interprets the conflict as one step forward in the march towards secular public education and pays particular attention to the controversy's political aspect. Unlike the majority of historians, Lannie includes a brief discussion of the political strife within the Catholic community, especially within the press. This paper intends to build upon Lannie's work in this area. Similarly, Carl Kaestle, a historian of U.S. education policy, interprets the controversy as one of the key

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[1] Diane Ravitch. *The Great School Wars* (New York: Basic Books, Inc, 1974), 61-62.
[2] Vincent Lannie. *Public Money and Parochial Education: Bishop Hughes, Governor Seward, and the New York Public School Controversy* (Cleveland: The Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1968), vii.

battles in the creation of a secular common schools in his book *Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society, 1780-1860.*

J.P. Dolan's history, *The Immigrant Church: New York's Irish and German Catholics, 1815-1865*, offers more in-depth attention to the workings of the Catholic Church in New York. Dolan also paid special attention to the German Catholics in New York, who are often overlooked, despite their economic success and lingual and ethnic differences from other American Catholics. Indeed, the very presence of German Catholics in New York caused Seward to include in his initial proposal that common schools teach in languages other than English. This paper will expand upon many of Dolan's ideas, while placing them within the framework of Catholic support for parochial schools.

The controversy can also be seen as an example of a growing group of immigrants asserting their political power. Robert Ernst takes this view in his book *Immigrant Life in New York City, 1825-1863.* The historians James Carper and Thomas Hunt offer a completely different interpretation of the school controversy in their book *The Dissenting Tradition in American Education.* Rather than viewing it through a cultural or political lens, they interpret the conflict as one of many battles in the formation of American education policy.

The historian Diane Ravitch in her book *The Great School Wars: A History of the New York City Public Schools* presents the controversy in a very different light. Rather than focus on its social or political legacy, Ravitch emphasizes the expansion of the educational bureaucracy in America. She frames the conflict as one of the seminal events in the still ongoing debate over control of public schools: the conflict between the will of

the majority versus the minority, and the struggle between the will of the people and the opinions of experts.

Such diverse historical interpretations of the battle for public money for parochial schools reflect the myriad social, political, and economic trends affecting American society in the early and mid-1800s. No matter their points of view, though, historians across the board agree on a few key points. First, the political strength displayed by Catholics throughout the controversy dismayed many Protestant Americans. This apprehension was a main cause of the creation of the American Republican (the Know-Nothing) Party barely a decade after the controversy's conclusion.[3] This political movement sought to place severe limits on immigration and the naturalization of foreign citizens, though it met with little success. However, despite its short life span, the party remains an example of the potency of nativism within the Untied States.

Second, the political unification that Catholics achieved effectively demonstrated their growing power as a political base. Though the controversy started with Seward's proposal, by 1841 it was clear that the battle had morphed into a test of Catholics' political might. The fact that the 1841 Democratic Party ticket for state legislature effectively split into pro-Catholic and anti-Catholic tickets within New York City, and that the pro-Catholic candidates swept the board, clearly attests to this. Furthermore, it signaled that it would be difficult for any politician to succeed in New York City without the Catholic vote. Though the Catholics of the city had been voting solidly Democratic for years, the divisive issue of public funding for Catholic schools split the Democratic

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[3] Lawrence McCafferey, *The Irish Catholic Diaspora in America* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1997) 201; Oscar Handlin, *Boston's Immigrants* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University), 201; Dennis Clark, *The Irish in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press 1973), 20.

base as had never been done before. Not only were the Catholics split by the election, but Democratic Protestants were, too. By sweeping the vote, Catholics showed that years of immigration from Europe had given them a numerical advantage in the city.[4]

Third, this incident set the precedent of Catholic religious leaders weighing in on political issues. Acknowledging the nascent political power of their followers, Catholic leaders found they could wield the power of the vote to effect change. Archbishop Hughes can be seen as the public face of this development: he debated political leaders in front of the city council, and led meetings to nominate politicians sympathetic to the Catholic position.[5]

Lastly, and most importantly, this controversy led to the creation of a large-scale, private Catholic school system throughout the United States. Archbishop Hughes, upon realizing that he would not gain public funds for Catholic schools, sought to remove the lingering Protestant influence in the city's public schools. For the city's Protestants, this ought to have ended the Catholics' complaints: without the Protestant influence, Catholics could in good conscience attend public schools. For Hughes, however, a school system devoid of any religious instruction was just as bad, if not worse. Therefore, he instead threw all of his support behind an effort to create a private Catholic school system to rival the public schools. Today, the evidence of his efforts can be seen in the Catholic school system that educates millions of children nation-wide each year.[6]

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[4] Lannie, 188; James C. Carper and Thomas C. Hunt, *The Dissenting Tradition in American Education* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing Co 2007), 19; Howard Leroy Mattice, *The Growth and Development of Roman Catholic Education in New York City, 1842-1875* (Ph D diss., New York University, 1979), 38.
[5] James C. Carper and Thomas C. Hunt, 18; Lannie, 54; J.P. Dolan, *New York's Irish and German Catholics, 1815-1865* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press 1975), 103.
[6] Lannie, 257; Carper and Hunt, 21; Dolan, 102.

In sum, earlier historians have placed the controversy within many frameworks of interpretation, namely the slow secularization of American public schools, the narrative of anti-immigration, and the balance between the power of the majority and the rights of the minority. However, in this research paper, I ask what this controversy reveals about the internal tensions within New York's heavily immigrant, Catholic community and popular participation in the school system created by Archbishop Hughes. Much of the scholarship in this field focuses on Catholics as a single, homogenous entity, and ignores differences of opinions among different Catholics. The authors mentioned above, with the slight exception of Vincent Lannie and Jay P. Dolan, treat the statements of the Catholic leaders as generally representative of their followers' opinions.

However, strife and ideological clashes existed even among the most devoted of religious groups. This paper explores this subtle disagreement among Catholics with regard to Governor Seward's and Archbishop Hughes' policies. A brief examination of evidence indicates the existence of this opposition. According to data gathered by the historian J.P. Nolan, in 1840, before the controversy erupted, approximately 20 percent of the 24,673 children in New York attended parochial schools. However, by 1870, robust immigration had increased the student population to 116,884, and yet the Catholic school population remained relatively steady at 19 percent.[7]

These statistics invite further questions. Why, after three decades of intense effort by the Catholic Church, did the Catholics of New York not attend these schools in greater numbers? To what extent did middle- and lower-class Catholics support the parochial school system before the controversy, and what effect did the Catholic leadership's

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[7] Jay P. Dolan, *The Immigrant Church: New York's Irish and German Catholics, 1815-1865* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1975) 106.

emphasis on the expansion of this system have on this support? Similarly, what methods of persuasion did the leadership of the Catholic Church use to rally both Catholics and non-Catholics to support granting Catholics a portion of the state common school fund?

To explore these questions, this paper will rely heavily on the public statements and written correspondence of Catholic leaders, as well as contemporary editorials written in New York newspapers by authors with various political and religious affiliations. The public statements of the leader of the Catholic movement, Archbishop Hughes, are especially useful in this regard. The most vital newspapers in this debate were the *New York Catholic Register* and the *New York Truth Teller*. These two papers, though both were Catholic, espoused vastly different opinions with regard to the establishment of a separate Catholic parochial school system.

Due to the lack of available primary sources expressing the views of average Catholics, this paper will rely heavily on anecdotal and statistical evidence, as well as on secondary sources describing their general views on the social, economic, political, and religious issues. Some of my interpretations will thus inevitable be more suggestive than conclusive.

These sources will reveal that Catholics held mixed feelings about their private school system. Though many Catholics professed to agree with Archbishop Hughes' proposal, in practice they did not, as a general rule, send their children to parochial schools. Catholics in New York had many reasons to agree with their bishop. They generally believed that the New World should not reflect the anti-Catholicism so prevalent in the Old World. Irish Catholics especially desired religious freedom after living under English Protestant rule for centuries. German-Catholics, too, desired to

maintain their culture within parochial schools. The stirring nativist movement with the United States fought against these aspirations. Furthermore, Catholics truly felt that public schools which taught with a Protestant bias and the King James Bible put the faith of their children religion at risk. Catholics expressed such sentiments at the polls as well as on the streets, as demonstrated in the 1842 riots in New York City.

However, these concerns did not outweigh the many reasons Catholics chose not to support these schools. A significant minority of New York's Catholics also maintained that the public schools did not endanger the faith of their children. Also, many Catholics felt that the opportunity for their children to be acculturated to the American way of life outweighed the religious dangers of the public schools. Economic woes, though, caused the majority of Catholic parents to choose public schools over parochial ones. The crushing poverty in which many of New York's Catholics lived caused the majority of them to opt for the government-provided schools, rather than support their own schools. Within the Catholic hierarchy, too, dissent existed concerning the school question. A group of Catholics, both priests and lay Catholics, from Buffalo and Rochester disagreed with Bishop Hughes vehemently on the implementation of the plan. The Buffalo and Rochester Catholics claimed that the planned changes would place too much power and wealth under Hughes's control, and Hughes denounced the dissenting Catholics as having lost all but a "shadowy resemblance" of their faith.[8] For all these reasons, Catholic attendance at parochial schools remained below the Church's desired levels. Though parochial schools would grow to become a major force in

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[8] William Lecouteulx, *Letter to the Right Rev. John Hughes* written December 11, 1841 (Buffalo, NY: 1852) written Dec. 11, 1841, published in Buffalo, NY March 31, 1852

American education and American Catholicism, they never became the sole source of education for American Catholics as the Church hoped.

II. We Didn't Start the Fire: A Brief Background on the Educational System of New York City, Anti-Catholicism in America, and the Catholic Church of the United States

In New York City in 1839 more than 12,000 of approximately 40,000 children ages 4-14 failed to attend school. Many of these children, first- or second-generation immigrants, had to work to financially support their families. Others either lacked the motivation to attend school, couldn't speak the language in which lessons were taught, or were forbidden by their parents to attend the common schools on religious grounds. Instead of attending school, these children took jobs as newsboys or peddlers, or became beggars or vagrants.[9] These children were a very visible and overt sign of the city's growing poor, largely Catholic, immigrant class. More than that, they represented the changes sweeping New York: the city was growing rapidly, losing its dominant Protestant majority, and growing more and more overcrowded.

The sight of thousands of children roaming the city greatly affected William Seward, the Whig governor of New York. Having spent time in Ireland and seen the plight of the Irish there, Seward was convinced that the New World would provide a better opportunity for these immigrants than did the old.[10] His 1840 address to the legislature reflected his commitment to improve the lot of immigrants throughout the state, especially in New York City, though in doing so he largely bucked the Whig party line. Historians have debated whether or not Seward had viable political motives for trying to extend state funds to Catholic parochial schools. While it can be argued that he

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[9] Robert Ernst, *Immigrant Life in New York City, 1825-1863* (New York: Ira J. Friedman, Inc., 1963), 140-142.

[10] James C. Carper and Thomas C. Hunt, *The Dissenting Tradition in American Education* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing Co 2007), 18.

was trying to sway Catholic votes to the Whig Party from the Democrats,[11] it has been convincingly demonstrated that Seward's actions would not have yielded any political gain. He risked losing support of his party base, while the probability that Catholic voters would be swayed over to the Whig Party was small.[12]

Seward's controversial address to the legislature aimed to drastically alter the state of public education in New York City. Under the educational model of the day, a privately managed non-profit organization known as the Public School Society (P.S.S.) received the vast majority of the city's educational funds and in turn dispersed it to the public schools. Seward's proposal would have drastically reduced the amount of funding the P.S.S. received, and diverted it instead to schools managed by Catholic officials, with teachers who spoke the language and shared the religion of their students. His proposal would, in effect, have made Catholic schools part of the common school system of the day and upturn the educational status quo. These changes reflected three major and contentious evolving aspects of society in New York City: the growing Catholic immigrant population, increasing anti-Catholic sentiment among Protestants, and changing ideas about the role of the state in education.

Immigration

The United States, as a nation shaped by immigrants from its founding, was no stranger to newcomers from Europe arriving on its shores seeking economic opportunity and religious freedom. The population of the United States in 1800 was approximately

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[11] John Pratt, "Religious Conflict in the Development of the New York Public School System," *History of Education Quarterly*, 5, no. 2, (1965): 117.
[12] Lannie, 22-24.

5.3 million, and one percent Catholic.[13] The nation received a huge influx of immigrants throughout the nineteenth century: between 1800 and 1810, 1.91 million immigrants had landed upon its shores, representing a 33 percent increase in the U.S. population. These enormous increases continued throughout the century. By 1840, when Governor Seward sparked the school controversy with his speech, the population of the United States had mushroomed to more than 17 million, marking more than a threefold increase from 1800 in four decades. New York City grew an even more drastically, from 60,515 in 1800 to 312,710 in 1840, more than a fivefold increase.[14] Due to this population boom, the city experienced dramatic transformations.

The large numbers of immigrants who arrived had little in common with the New Yorkers with whom they became neighbors. New York in 1800 was a merchant town promoting the Puritan ideals upon which the colonies were founded: temperance, Protestantism, and a break from European traditions. The immigrants of the early nineteenth century, on the other hand, were not so much escaping religious persecution as they were fleeing economic hardships in Europe. Seeking their fortune while trying to retain their culture, the immigrants clashed with the New Yorkers already established there.[15]

Throughout this period, it must be pointed out that New York was more religiously diverse than the rest of the nation. The historian Diane Ravitch estimates that while the nation was only one percent Catholic in 1800, New York was only 85 percent Protestant. The existing Catholic population implies that the arriving Catholics encountered a small but established religious base in New York, allowing them to join a

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[13] Carper and Hunt, 31.
[14] United States Census Bureau
[15] Jay P. Dolan, *The American Catholic Experience* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc, 1985), 101.

pre-existing religious community rather than create one anew. This situation in turn enabled them to create a vibrant immigrant culture quickly, drawing in more immigrants and rousing nativist reactions from New York's Protestants.[16]

The growth of the Catholics Church in New York was slow at first. Catholics did not establish a church of their own until St. Peter's 1785, and did build a second until 1809. In 1808, the growing Catholic population required church officials to divide the expansive diocese of Baltimore, making New York the seat of the new diocese, led by Bishop Concanen. However, the growth of the church remained gradual in this period, and by 1822, only eight priests and approximately 20,000 Catholics called New York home.[17]

Anti-Immigrant and Anti-Catholic Sentiment

As more and more immigrants flooded into America, a clash of cultures emerged between nativists, who regularly expressed their dislike of immigrants, and Catholic immigrants, who attempted to carve a niche for themselves in their new country. One of the most poignant symbols of this cultural clash was the Catholic Church itself. Fleeing religious persecution in the Old World, the early settlers of America harbored deep cultural dislike of Catholicism and anything resembling it.

An example of the entrenched anti-Catholic sentiment that existed in the early United States can be seen in the reaction to the Parliament's religious laws within French Canada in 1774. In attempting to incorporate this territory into their empire, Parliament

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[16] Ravitch, 6.
[17] Bayley, 237; J.A. Burns, *The Catholic School System in the United States: Its Principles, Origin, and Establishment* (New York: Benzinger, 1908), 271.

proposed to grant religious freedom within it. In response to this, the Continental Congress called the act "dangerous in the extreme degree to the Protestant religion and to the civil rights and liberties of all Americans," fearing that a Catholic French Canada would give Catholicism a foothold through which it could convert and subjugate the rest of the continent.[18] As a matter of fact, it was not until 1806 that Catholics gained the right in the state of New York to hold office.[19] Neil McCluskey wrote that so prevalent was anti-Catholic teaching that "Hatred and fear of 'Popery' or 'Romanism' were imbibed with the milk a God-fearing Protestant child drew from its mother's breast."[20]

As the 1800s continued, immigrants continued to flood into the United States. Yet these masses of immigrants did not go unnoticed; their vast population increase stirred the anti-Catholic feelings of the nation's Protestant majority. The most famous manifestation of nativism was the sensational book *Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk*, published in 1836. In this book, a woman who claimed to have been an escaped nun from Canada alleged that priests forced nuns to have sex with them, and any babies produced through such liasons were baptized and murdered. Though the book's allegations were irrevocably proven false a few years after its publication, its stories remained a potent source of anti-Catholic beliefs.[21]

Nativism was not limited to the popular press. It also extended to the pulpit. Many traveling Protestant preachers made a living stirring up anti-Catholic passions in their sermons. A series of these sermons in Charlestown in 1834 demonstrated the latent anti-Catholicism waiting to be set off in the minds of many Americans. In the winter of

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[18] John Cogley, *Catholic America* (New York: The Dial Press, 1973), 7.
[19] Kerby A. Miller, *Irish immigrants in the land of Canaan : letters and memoirs from colonial and revolutionary America, 1675-1815*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 418.
[20] Neil McCluskey, *Public Schools and Moral Education* (New York: Columbia University, 1958), p 48.
[21] Cogley, 43.

1833-34 an itinerant preacher came to Charlestown to deliver a series of lectures entitled "the Devil and the Pope of Rome." These lectures, as one observer noted, never mentioned the Pope without the devil in the same breath, and "excited a strong feeling against Catholics and all their ways." Additionally a sensational book akin to *Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk* chronicled a young woman's alleged forced conversion to Catholicism in a convent and daring escape before being taken away to St. Louis.[22] These lectures so stoked anti-Catholic sentiment that a mob burned down an Ursuline convent in which Protestant girls were taught, demanding to free the children supposedly imprisoned in dungeons beneath the convent. Though no one was hurt, this incident illustrated capacity for violence anti-Catholicism could provoke.[23]

As these examples illustrate, Catholics in the early nineteenth century faced intense animosity from Protestants who despised Catholicism for: its connection to the Old World, its allegiance to a foreign pope whom they believed weakened their nation, and its reliance on foreign languages and strange rituals which set Catholics apart as different and not culturally "American." All the while, their numbers and potential political influence continued to grow as immigration swelled their ranks.

Changing Attitudes towards Education

Within this harsh and unforgiving cultural landscape, many Catholics under the revitalizing leadership of Bishop John Hughes sought to gain public funding for their parochial schools under Governor Seward's proposal in 1840. To understand who stood to gain and lose from this proposal, one must answer some basic questions about the

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[22] Louise Goddard Whitney, *Mass Violence in America* (New York: Arno Press, 1969), 5, 19.
[23] Ibid, p 82-86.

condition of public education in 1840. Who managed public education funds? Which children were best served, and conversely, which were least served? Additionally, what previous attempts did Catholics make at private education, and what was the state of that effort in 1840? Finally, and most importantly, what eventual effect did Seward's proposal have? What was the state of public and parochial education after 1843?

To answer these questions, one must return to 1805, when Thomas Eddy, a Quaker, founded the Free School Society (later to become the Public School Society). In this time, publicly funded schools had yet to exist. Most children stayed in the home to be educated by their parents and were later sent to be an apprentice. The sons and daughters of the better off (such as those who attended the Ursuline convent in Charlestown) could to afford expensive private education.[24]

A small number of free, privately funded schools did exist however. Private, religiously motivated, and philanthropic organizations funded these schools, and they generally managed to educate only a small number of the poorest children. Among these schools, one Catholic school could be found, attached to St. Peter's. This school, founded in 1800, educated roughly five hundred pupils per year.[25] The free school at St. Patrick's opened a decade later, had a similar enrollment. Thus, given the population estimates of the time, a great number of the Catholic youth could not be educated in a Catholic setting.

At its founding, the Free School Society held much in common with other organizations running free schools. Its founder, was alarmed at the growing number of illiterate boys on the streets of New York, and blamed the situation on the lack of

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[24] Dolan, 100, 142.
[25] Bayley, 66.

opportunities for a "virtuous education." He founded the Free School Society to provide such an education to these children. Its goals, as stated by its president, were to ensure "virtuous conduct" through "early instruction" in "fixed habits of industry, decency, and order." Moreover, the education of the Free School Society would foster the values of "obedience, subordination, promptness, regularity, cleanliness, thrift, and temperance."[26]

Thus, the society had cultural assimilation firmly stated as a goal from the start, as many parents of these poor children were recent immigrants for agricultural areas, with little knowledge of the "habits of industry," and "promptness," as immigrants, who had largely been agricultural workers, worked according by the sun and not the clock. Most tellingly, the goal of instilling temperance in the poor youth, as intemperance was one of the main points of contention the Protestant majority had against the Catholic immigrants. Such goals, however, did not make the Free School Society unique by any means. Many free schools, run by churches or private groups of citizens had religious conversion and cultural integration of immigrants as a stated goal.[27] Until 1825, these schools all received money from the state government, depending on the number of students attending each institution.[28] These schools cannot be compared to modern day public schools because while they received part of their funds from the government, the government had no control over instruction or school administration.

The Free School Society enjoyed relative success and expanded slowly over the next two decades. Simultaneously, and crucial to the development of public schools in the United States, American taxpayers were beginning to accept the validity of spending

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[26] Lannie, 12-13.
[27] Dolan, p 142
[28] McCluskey, Neil Gerard, *Catholic Education in America, a documentary history* (New York:Columbia University, 1964), 65.

public dollars for public education. Its biggest proponent, Horace Mann of Masschusetts, described the leading educational model as "The Religion of Heaven," in which "the creeds of men should be postponed until [children] were sufficiently matured to weigh evidence and arguments." In this view, the Scriptures represent the most perfect religious documents, and so the "Religion of Heaven" was based solely upon them. Mann defeated the general resistance to public schooling through separating education from specific denominational teaching.[29]

As Mann's new idea gained hold, the population of New York City, and the schools required to teach the children, continued expanding. By 1822, the school fund of New York City was split between twenty organizations. The New York Free School Society enrolled the largest number of students at 3412, and received $6687.52 in public funds. The Catholic institutions were much smaller: St. Peter's school enrolled 316 students and received $619.36, while St. Patrick's school enrolled 345 pupils and collected $676.20. The Roman Catholic Benevolent Society, which taught orphans, obtained $62.72 for 32 pupils.[30]

Also in 1822, the Bethel Baptist free school received for $1479.80 for its 755 students. Eager to expand its services after only two years of existence, the Bethel Baptist Church requested and received permission from the city to use its excess funds to build new buildings. The Free School Society, perhaps sensing a threat to its control over the free schools, resisted this city legislation; letters between the two organizations bristled with allegations: the Free School Society accused the Bethel Baptists of sectarianism and using public money to spread their particular denomination, while the

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[29] Lannie, ix.
[30] Thomas Boese, *Public Education in the City of New York: Its History, Condition, and Statistics* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1869) 102.

Bethel Baptists accused the Free School Society of monopolizing education funds.[31] The Baptists triumphed, though, and received permission from the city to expand.[32]

However, a scandal erupted only a few years later in when the Bethel Baptist Church was caught falsifying its records, reporting inflated teacher salaries and student enrollment in order to obtain more public funding. In the public hearings that followed, the Free School Society argued that any purely religious entity could not be trusted not to use extralegal means by which to expand its schools and therefore its ability to proselytize. The Common Council, the legislative body of New York City, agreed, and in 1825, all organizations deemed specifically "sectarian" were prohibited from receiving public funds. Conveniently for the Free School Society, they were the only nondenominational organization receiving public funds for education. Though other schools claimed to teach without sectarian bias, they were led by sectarian churches and therefore excluded from public monies. In 1826, then, the Common Council gave the Free School Society a new charter, renaming it the Public School Society (P.S.S.) and giving it near complete control over the city's educational budget. Moreover, the new charter gave all school-age children the right to attend the Public School Society schools, regardless of economic status.[33]

In the years between 1825 and Seward's speech in 1840, only three organizations managed to break the stranglehold the P.S.S. enjoyed. One of these organizations, the Protestant Orphan Asylum, appealed its loss of funds immediately, claiming that it, too, was a nonsectarian organization and managed to retain state funding. The two other

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[31] Free School Society of New York, *A Correspondence Between the Trustees of the New York Free School Society and the Trustees of the Bethel Free School* (New York) 1-5.
[32] Ravitch, 20-21.
[33] Ibid, p 21.

organizations had a much more difficult time, and the reaction of the P.S.S. to each request reflects its monopolistic tendencies. The Roman Catholic Benevolent Society, which took in, sheltered, and educated orphans in a nonsectarian manner, made the first such request early in 1831. It argued that the ruling of the Common Council had deprived many children of its vital services. The P.S.S., though, instead saw both a threat to its control over the city's education fund, as well as the Roman Catholic Church increasing its prominence. It argued against the Benevolent Society, claiming that it was a "closed corporation" in which one must be Roman Catholic to be a member.[34] Therefore, the argument went, since the taxpayers could not exercise control over their money, funding the Benevolent Society amounted to a tithe paid by New York's citizens.[35] The Common Council, though, ruled in favor of the Roman Catholic Benevolent Society, saying that the orphaned children could not obtain the services of the P.S.S., and therefore had no other educational option.[36]

Taking courage from the success of the Catholic society, a similar Methodist society attempted to gain some educational funds for its mission. Again, the P.S.S. raised objections to this competition for its funding, and this time it succeeded. The Common Council ruled that because the Methodist society took in "destitute" as well as orphaned children, its mission overlapped with that of the P.S.S., and therefore could not receive state funds.[37] Thus, from 1825-1840, the P.S.S. enjoyed a near monopoly of the city's education fund, and fiercely resisted any attempt to break it. By 1840 the P.S.S. ran

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[34] The Public School Society, *Reasons of the Trustees of the Public School Society for their Remonstrances Against the Petition of the Roman Catholic Benevolent Society* (New York: Mahlon Day, 1831), 2-4.
[35] Boese, 107.
[36] Rev. Edward Connors, *Church-State Relationships In Education in the State of New York* (New York: The Catholic University of America Press, 1951), 6-8.
[37] Ibid, 6-8.

dozens of schools and enrolled almost 20,000 pupils.[38] These schools enjoyed near unanimous support from the Protestant population of the city, and outside observers praised their quality.[39]

The nature of the education provided by the P.S.S. requires elaboration. Though the schools claimed to be nondenominational, that term applied only to Protestant sects, which generally found the schools to teach religion adequately. Catholic leaders, on the other hand, found three main problems with the religious instruction provided by the P.S.S. The first point of contention was the reading of the Bible in class. Catholic dogma refused to acknowledge the King James Bible, the translation preferred by Protestants, as legitimate, and therefore saw the use of the Bible in the classroom as an attack on the faith of their children. Moreover, the Protestant-influenced ideas of Horace Mann encouraged students to read the Bible "without comment," so as not to introduce any sectarian influence. Catholic belief, in contrast, maintained that there was one and only one interpretation of the Bible's verses. To allow young Catholic children to read the Bible without guidance, then, was to imperil their Catholic belief and pollute it with incorrect personal interpretations of the Bible.[40]

The second main Catholic grievance against the P.S.S. schools was that Protestant hymns were sung in class. These hymns glorified Protestant leaders whom the Catholics despised, as well as reinforced Protestant culture.[41] The last, and perhaps the most fervent objection the Catholic establishment had against the P.S.S. schools concerned the content of the schoolbooks. These books, written almost exclusively by Protestant

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[38] Carper and Hunt, 15.
[39] Lannie, 36-8.
[40] Howard Leroy Mattice, "The Growth and Development of Roman Catholic Education in New York City, 1842-1875" (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1979), 38.
[41] Lannie, p 41.

authors, insulted Catholics' heritage, and portrayed Catholics as devious and unenlightened. One oft-cited example of anti-Catholicism in a textbook comes *Putnam's Sequel*. In this book, the story of John Huss, a reformer of the Catholic Church in Bohemia, is told from a distinctly Protestant point of view:

> John Huss, a zealous reformer from Popery, who lived in Bohemia, towards the close of the fourteenth, and beginning of the fifteenth centuries. He was bold and persevering; but at length, trusting himself to the deceitful Catholics, he was by them brought to trial, condemned as a heretic, and burnt at the stake.[42]

Such one-sided histories infuriated Catholic parents and clergy, as did the epithet "Popery."

Prior to the school controversy in the early 1840s, though, how much effect did these objections have on Catholics' decisions to attend the schools? The historians of education James C. Carper and Thomas C. Hunt concluded that Catholics rejected "allegedly nonsectarian" schools" of the P.S.S. "on *principle*."[43] This was, of course, an exaggeration but it did capture the general cultural rejection of these public schools. Catholic children, due to their lower economic status, formed a large part of the mass of poor children that the P.S.S. intended to educate. Estimates for how many Catholic children attended these schools in histories vary greatly. Some Catholic writers, imagining Catholics as a persecuted minority, put the number as low as under one thousand. More realistic estimates put the number of Catholic children attending these schools in the low thousands.

With no alternative sources of revenue beside themselves, Catholics were unable to put together a capable Catholic school system. Instead, the Catholics schools that did exist were overcrowded, under-funded, and unable to meet the educational needs of a

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[42] McCluskey, 72.
[43] Ibid, p 15

growing Catholic population. Some of these schools were drowning in immense debt, and almost experienced difficulty recruiting and retaining teachers. According to one estimate, the eight parish schools in New York in 1840 could only accommodate 3000 students.[44]

Evidence exists, though, that attests to Catholic resistance to the P.S.S. schools while at the same time acknowledging the reality of their limited control over the public schools of New York City. In 1834, for example, Bishop Dubois petitioned the P.S.S. for a number of concessions in the largely Catholic School Number Five, near St. Patrick's school. Dubois requested that he be able to select a Catholic teacher to teach within the school, pending the approval of the P.S.S. He also requested the use of the school building for Sunday instruction of Catholic students, and the removal of offensive content from books. The P.S.S. almost completely ignored these requests. However, they did inquire as to the creation of a commission to eliminate the offensive passages from the books. Dubois and the Catholics, though, failed to pursue this, and their objections remained unadressed until the controversy erupted once again in 1840.[45]

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[44] Lannie, p 31.
[45] Connors, 12-13.

III. A Box of Chocolates: The School Controversy

Seward's January 1840 address, marked an attempt to make an enormous break from the past. His proposal to incorporate the Catholic schools into the public school system would have radically upended the existing system of almost exclusive P.S.S. control of the city's educational funds. It is not surprising, then, that even though the new, charismatic Bishop Hughes was abroad when the Seward gave the address, the Catholic hierarchy quickly took action. Mere weeks after the Governor's speech, the trustees of the New York Catholic Churches met in St. Peter's Church and drafted a petition to the Common Council of New York for educational funds.[46] Sensing an imminent change, other religious groups petitioned for school funds on the same grounds as the Catholics. They too claimed that the schools of the P.S.S. did not exactly represent their religious beliefs, and if the Catholics deserved money, then they did, too. These groups included Jews and the Scotch Presbyterians. In response, other religious organizations wrote to the Common Council opposing to the other groups' petitions, stating that the resulting division of the school fund would cause a severe reduction in the number of students educated in New York.[47] The Common Council rejected the Catholics' request.

Upon his return a few months later, Bishop Hughes resurrected the petition and revived Catholic enthusiasm for the subject. He also vowed to unify the Catholics on the issue, as there were still Catholic newspapers publishing opinion articles against the petition (see Chapter 3). Hughes organized numerous meetings within churches to consolidate Catholic support for the petition, and ensured that the second petition, unlike

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[46] Lannie, p 31.
[47] Lannie, p 36.

the first, would acknowledge the Catholic grievances against the public schools, and the reason these grievances could not be addressed.[48]

Most important among these grievances was Hughes' insistence that religion and education could not be separated, that one could not exist without the other. Therefore, Hughes reasoned, even a nondenominational Protestant education would sway Catholic pupils from their parents' religion using their tax dollars. The only solution, Hughes argued, was to have separate Catholic and Protestant school systems.[49]

After a summer of growing hype, a debate took place on October 29, 1840, and lasted through the next day. The indefatigable Hughes spoke at length, elaborating on the Catholic persecution in Ireland, the inadequacy of the P.S.S. schools for Catholic students, and the violation of American ideals that it constituted. His main allegations were that teaching Catholic students from the Protestant Bible was equivalent to undermining their Catholic belief at the public expense, and that teaching any religion in public school amounted to violating the separation between church and state. * One his favorite arguments in this regard was that Catholics "are citizens when they come to us to gather the taxes, but we are Roman Catholics when we look for a share of the fund thus contributed." He reiterated the petition's main concerns about the P.S.S. schools: that the Bible was read without comment, that Protestant hymns were sung, and that the books contained anti-Catholic smears.[50] His debating opponents from the P.S.S. reiterated the

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[48] Lannie, p 53-54.

[49] Speech of the Right Reverend Dr. Hughes- Review and Refutation of the Remonstrance of the Public School Society, (New York: New York Freeman's Journal), June 16, 17, and 21 1841.

*Hughes proposed that his Catholic schools would teach Catholic dogma outside of normal class time to avoid violating the separation of church and state.

[50] *Speeches of Archbishop Hughes on the School Question.* (New York: American News Company, 1864), 42.

talking points provided by Horace Mann and the vision of education the city had adopted: that the education in the P.S.S. schools should be acceptable because no sectarian principles were taught. They also objected vehemently to the use of their tax funds to support explicitly sectarian schools, citing the separation of church and state guaranteed in the Constitution. Though both sides proposed various compromises, none could be reached.[51]

At the end of the momentous debate, the Common Council created a five-man committee to investigate the Catholics' charges. It found that the Catholics' complaints about the content of books was valid, but that the Catholics schools, too, used these books, as no other textbooks were available. Moreover, upon inspection of the schools, the committee found that the public schools were very well-run, while the Catholic schools were "lamentably deficient in accommodations and supplies of books and teachers: the rooms were all excessively crowded and poorly ventilated; the books much worn as well as deficient in numbers, and the teachers not sufficiently numerous."[52]

Therefore, despite Hughes' enormous efforts, the Common Council rejected the Catholics' petition, fifteen to one. Among the many reasons for this, historians argue, were nativism, anti-Catholicism, but most of all, the uncomfortable intertwining of church and state that would have occurred had the state created Catholic public schools.[53]

Governor Seward was up for reelection in November 1840, which fell between the debate at the Common Council and its decision. He nearly lost, having angered many of his Protestant constituent with his support of public funding for Catholic schools. However, the popularity of the Whig candidate for President, William Harrison, drew

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[51] Lannie, 96.
[52] Ibid, p 97.
[53] Ibid, p 100-101.

many Whig voters to the polls and gave Seward the victory. Hughes was outraged that his flock had generally voted against the Seward at the polls, and blamed the lingering Catholic dissent on the issue as well as "secret societies" that required their members to vote Democratic.[54]*

Neither side wasted any time in 1841. Both the Catholics and the P.S.S. sent petitions to the state legislature regarding the school issue. The legislature relegated the issue to the superintendent of education, John C. Spencer, who considered the petitions until April 26, 1841. On that day, Spencer criticized the P.S.S. for its poor educational results in New York City. In the entire state of New York in 1840, 549,000 of 592,000 children ages 5-16 attended public schools. However, in New York City, of 62,952 school-age children, only 30,758 children attended schools, and of those only 13,189 attended public schools.[55] Spencer proposed an extension of the district system in which elected city commissioners controlled the city's education, and removal of the P.S.S. His bill floundered and failed in the legislature, unable to command the support of either major party due to its controversial nature.[56]

Amid the uncertainty regarding the fate of the bill, the state legislature elections of 1841 became all-important. Both the Protestants who opposed public funding for Catholic schools and Catholics who sought it saw the elections as a watershed event--either side could gain or lose the seats crucial to victory or defeat. Fifteen seats were in jeopardy in the election. As tensions increased, both sides sharpened their rhetoric against the other. In late spring, a riot took place in front of a Protestant preacher's

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[54] Lannie, 123-4.
*It is unclear which secret societies Hughes blamed for this, but it is likely that the emerging immigrant political machine was the target of his anger.
[55] Ibid, 130-133.
[56] Ibid, 156.

church in response to an editorial battle between him and Bishop Hughes. As a sign that both parties were digging in, in May 1841, Protestant nativists formed the American Protestant Union to oppose further Catholic interference in public schools. The group elected Samuel Morse as its president, the author of *Foreign Conspiracy Against the Liberties of the United States*, in which he claimed that claimed "that there is good reason for believing that the despots of Europe are attempting, by the spread of Popery in this country, to subvert its free institutions."[57]

Those supporting the Catholics' petition were not complacent. Hughes, ever the astute politician and leader, realized that the issue created an enormous rift in the traditional party of immigrants, the Democrats. He placed his faith in the prominent place the issue would play in the election, as well as the large numbers of unified Catholic voters. On October 25 he told his followers to vote solely on this one issue, and to disregard the party affiliations of the candidates. In doing this, he created what is knows as the "Carroll Hall" ticket of only those candidates who supported the Catholic petition. In response, Democrats against the petition created a slate of pro-P.S.S. candidates known as "Tammany Hall." To add to the confusion, the American Protestant Union endorsed what they called the "Union ticket," a collection of Whig and Democratic candidates who opposed the bill.[58]

Hughes' creation of "Carroll Hall" ticket can be seen as a major turning point in the controversy. Combined with his work organizing meetings at churches, and arguing before the Common Council, it marks Hughes' full-blown entry into the political arena. The endorsement of a specific list of candidates represented a major break from past

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[57] Ibid, p 152.
[58] Ibid, p 183-188.

religious efforts in politics. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, religion had been concerned more with the general morals of society, and to a lesser extent specific policies. Hughes' endorsement, then, was unprecedented. More significantly, it set the precedent for later Catholic bishops and other religious leaders to attempt to influence the votes of their followers.

When the dust settled on election day, the Democrats had gained a narrow lead in the state legislature and Whigs had suffered a grievous loss. All the candidates Hughes had endorsed on the Carroll Hall ticket were victorious, and only those candidates who had been on the Tammany Hall ticket but not the Carroll Hall ticket lost. Political observers throughout the city noted the shift in politics that had taken place. The secular *Evening Post* remarked upon the Catholics' new strength as a voting bloc.[59]

In his 1842 address to the legislature, Seward pragmatically abandoned his previous endorsement of public money for Catholic schools. Seeing the window of opportunity open, Seward proposed legislation very similar to the Spencer Bill of the year before. Barely a month later, William McLay, a member of the Assembly and head of the Committee on Colleges, Academics, and Common Schools, introduced legislation that would institute the district system into New York City. The final version of the bill required that each ward of the city elect two commissioners, two inspectors, and five trustees of common schools each June, who would oversee the schools of that ward. This bill incorporated schools of the Public School Society, and all schools were open to all children 4-16. Any decision regarding what religious education, if any, to provide would be made by the two commissioners of each ward.[60]

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[59] Ibid, p 188.
[60] Ibid, p 233.

Following the passage of this law, a street fight broke out between Irish Protestants (Orangemen) who were generally Democrats, and Irish Catholics. After scattering the Catholics, the Orangemen proceeded to the house of Bishop Hughes and pelted it with stones, breaking windows and destroying furniture. The mayor and the police arrived just in time to save the house from being torched, and the militia was called to ensure peace throughout the night.[61]

The Aftermath: The Establishment of a Large-Scale, Privately-Funded Parochial School System

The passage of the Maclay Act cannot be considered a victory for the Catholics of New York, despite their display of political power and the ensuing realignment of municipal political power. Their initial goal of gaining the use of public education funds for their Catholic schools was further away than ever. The new district educational system ensured that the city's Catholics would have to reach a compromise with Protestants in their ward. The first county supervisor elected was William Stone, the nativist editor of the *New York Commercial Advertiser*. Just one year after the passage of the Maclay Bill, the mostly Catholic fourth ward petitioned the Board of Education to stop Bible reading in schools, since Catholics objected to it. The Board rejected the request, stating that reading the Bible "without note or comment" was non-sectarian.[62] Thus, the victory in the election and the passage of the Maclay Bill could hardly be considered a victory. While it gave Catholics a viable route to air their grievances, and

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[61] Ibid, p 241-243.
[62] Mattice, p 38.

over time helped make the schools more acceptable for them, it also kept the Catholic schools starved of cash.

To address this fact, Hughes turned to the state of Catholic schools following the school controversy. In lectures, sermons, and published material, he stressed the need for Catholics to enroll their children in Catholic parochial schools. In 1842, the Catholic school population had fallen to 4,000 due to reasons to be explained in the following chapters, but a decade later in 1853 it had risen to 10,000. This increase continued: in 1865 the Catholic schools claimed 16,000 pupils, and 22,214 in 1870. However, throughout this time, the total common school population rose accordingly, from 24,000 in 1840 to 67,000 in 1865, and 116,000 in 1870. The proportion of students in Catholic schools to the total school population remained stagnant, and even fell slightly, over this period, even though population growth was fueled by largely by Catholic immigration.[63] The reasons for this will be explored in the following chapters.

[63] Dolan, p 106.

IV. All the News that's Fit to Print: Newspaper Editorials during the Controversy

In November 1841, Catholics expressed their substantial political power at the polls and every candidate endorsed by Bishop Hughes on the "Carroll Hall" was elected to office. This political shift of power did not go unnoticed, and newspapers throughout the city recognized that the changing demographics of New York had led to a general shift in political power.[64] It must be remembered, though, that Catholics only created this apparent general consensus and hardening of political lines along religious lines towards the end of the School Controversy. Bishop Hughes felt compelled to lead a series of meetings to coalesce support throughout 1840.[65]

The newspapers of New York reflect myriad opinions that members of the city held, both Catholic and Protestant. This section will discuss the various opinions espoused by three major categories of newspapers: secular newspapers with no declared religious affiliation, explicitly Protestant newspapers, and explicitly Catholic newspapers and publications. Once examined, these various newspapers will yield nuanced and somewhat surprising results. First, certain portions of the Catholic petitions garnered sympathy and even support among both secular and even Protestant audiences. Second, even while agreeing with portions of Catholics' reasoning, these same papers resorted to nativist and anti-Catholic language to discount other Catholic arguments, reflecting their somewhat ambivalent commitment to freedom of religion within the United States. Finally, there existed significant differences of opinion among the Catholic population of New York. This disagreement will be seen both during the controversy, as evidenced by

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[64] Lannie, 188.
[65] Ibid, 53-54.

an editorial battle between two Catholic newspapers, and after the Maclay Bill was passed, in the publications of a prominent convert to Catholicism named Orestes Brownson.

The most prominent secular newspaper throughout the controversy was the *New York Observer*. Despite the prominence of anti-Catholicism, the *Observer* did not entirely reject the claims made in the Catholics' petitions to the Common Council in 1840. In what can be considered an example of the growing popular acceptance of religious toleration, in September 1840, the *Observer* wrote that "if any book, directly, or indirectly, holds up the doctrines of any sect to ridicule, or insidiously teaches those doctrines in preference to others, that book must be abandoned."[66] It appears, then, that at least portions of the Catholics' petitions garnered sympathy among the general population of New York.

While the *Observer* accepted the validity of that portion of the Catholics' arguments, it vehemently opposed almost all their other positions. With regard to Bible reading in the classroom, the *Observer* strongly supported the presence of the Bible within public schools along the Horace Mann model of teaching the "Religion of Heaven" while avoiding sectarian clashes. Its editorials likened Bishop Hughes and other Catholic reformers to Herod and Pilate, saying all of them were "united in [pursuing]... the expulsion of the Word of God" from the public. Moreover, the *Observer* attacked the disagreement with Bible-reading in the class using nativist language, labeling it "Jesuitism."[67] The term "Jesuitism" refers to the Jesuit order of Catholics, who were especially targeted as symbols of Catholic corruption and expansion, due to their roles as

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[66] *New York Observer*, September 5, 1840.
[67] *New York Observer*, September 5, 1840.

missionaries and prominent role in the Church within Europe. Thus, the *Observer* offers keen insight to the nuances of the language employed by many secular periodicals of the day. Just as the *Observer* did in this case, these newspapers could apply rational and seemingly unbiased analyses of an event, while simultaneously, and perhaps almost subconsciously, using anti-Catholic language. Another clear example of anti-Catholicism can be found in the editorials of the *Observer*, which in 1842 commented that common schools were such a powerful anti-Catholic force that they "would kill Popery even in Italy."[68]

Nuanced and not altogether predictable opinions about the school controversy also appeared in the Protestant press of New York. A newspaper published by the Episcopalian Church within New York called *The Churchman* offered one example of Protestants agreeing with the Catholic petitions more than one would expect. *The Churchman* agreed in principle with Bishop Hughes when he argued that a "full education" cannot exclude religious teachings. Without it, the newspaper argued, a child is left in "partial development," which neglects the "harmony of man's nature."[69] By contrast, the Public School Society, when searching for a compromise with Catholic petitioners in late 1840, disagreed with such sentiment, and offered to remove all religious education.

Thus, *The Churchman* essentially agreed with the position of Bishop Hughes, namely that if the schools were completely secular, then they were "godless" and taught students to be "infidels."[70] The editors of *The Churchman*, however, in anony way meant to condone the teaching of Catholic Religion in public schools as Hughes desired. In this

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[68] *New York Observer*, April 16, 1842.
[69] Lannie, 65.
[70] Ibid, 65.

way, *The Churchman*'s editorial was not as much an endorsement of the Catholic petition as a disagreement with the Public School Society that public schools could eliminate religious teaching.

While *The Churchman* offered an example of a Protestant paper agreeing in principle with the Catholic petitioners, such examples were rare. More representative of mainstream Protestant America was the *Christian Advocate and Journal*, a Methodist publication. This paper claimed that the only people who could disagree with reading the Bible in classrooms were the Catholics, because they were intent on controlling the content and interpretation of the Bible. The paper considered the Catholic reluctance to have the Bible in schools "the artful policy employed by the enemies of our common Christianity."[71] Here one can see the anti-Catholic sentiment common in the mid-nineteenth century, which rejected Catholicism as a legitimate branch of Christianity, and portrayed Catholics as devious people seeking to undermine Protestantism.

While the differences between the Protestant newspapers were largely superficial, differences among Catholic newspapers were far more fundamental. The two papers that embody this disagreement most are the *Catholic Register*, edited by the vicar general of Archbishop Hughes, Reverend Felix Varela, and the *New York Truth Teller*, edited by William Denman, a Catholic layman with Democratic sympathies.[72] The most telling example of disagreement occurred immediately after Governor Seward initially proposed his plan in January 1840. In the *Truth Teller*, Denman's editorials disagreed with Seward and supported the basic principles put forward by Horace Mann that had guided the common schools since their inception, namely that common schools should teach secular

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[71] *Christian Advocate and Journal* (New York), April 24, 1840.
[72] Lannie, 29, 41.

lessons and moral training, and leave parents to teach the religious beliefs particular to their sect in the home. [73] The *Truth Teller* also opposed Governor Seward's intention to use languages other than English in common schools, claiming that doing so encouraged European traditions which had no place in a free republic.[74] In arguing this, Denman and the *Truth Teller* appealed to the nascent American nationalism. Denman's opposition to the use of foreign languages in schools also indicates his support of acculturation of Catholic immigrant children, which as noted before, was one of the major reasons Catholic parents declined to send their children to parochial schools.

Just days after the *Truth Teller* publicized its opposition to the governor's plan, the *Register* listed again the grievances the Church had against the common schools. The *Register* repeated objections to Catholic children reading the Protestant Bible without proper Catholic guidance, the anti-Catholic smears that often appeared in the textbooks, and public school teachers who often held anti-Irish and anti-Catholic biases. Varela supported the governor's plan for "Catholic Public Schools," and believed that Catholic children were obliged to avoid the current common schools at all costs. The *Register* defined what would become the guiding belief of Catholics supporting the Governor's proposal: that "true liberality and real tolerance would be shown by obtaining the object which is the education, without interfering with any body's principles of religion, but at present it is not the case in regard to Catholics."[75]

The *Truth Teller* responded two days later, and mirrored the *Register*'s complaints about the common school system, and pointed to its own editorial record of supporting

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[73] Carl Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic; Common Schools and American Society, 1780-1860* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983), 80.
[74] *New York Truth Teller,* February 15, 1840.
[75] *New York Catholic Register*, February 20, 1840.

public funding for Catholic schools. However, William Denman remained convinced that Governor Seward's plan violated the Constitution's clause regarding the separation of church and state.[76] The *Register* countered days later that the governor's proposal embodied the Catholic position, and that it was illogical to support one and not the other.[77] By labeling the *Truth Teller*'s position "illogical," the editor of the paper, Rev. Varela, sought to consolidate Catholic public opinion by ridiculing the ideas of a layman.

The debate within these two newspapers reflected the debate within the entire Catholic community. After assuming leadership of the Catholic battle for public funding in summer 1840, the intense of debate among Catholics on the topic dismayed Hughes. To combat this, he led bi-weekly meetings in the basement of St. James' Church in order to reach a consensus on the matter. Additionally, Hughes gave speeches at a series of eight meetings of Catholics throughout 1840. Hughes addressed not only the religious and moral sides of the debate, but also the legal and political.[78] One obstacle to achieving consensus was the fact that Seward was a Whig, and Catholics voted almost solidly Democratic. Thus, in his meetings, Hughes not only educated Catholics about the school question, but also attempted to energize them politically behind a governor whom they generally mistrusted due to his party affiliation.

Perhaps the best example of disunity among the ranks of Catholics can be seen in the reaction of Hughes following the gubernatorial election of November 1840. Although Seward narrowly won a second term, Catholics generally voted for his Democratic challenger. Hughes expressed outrage, especially against the *Truth Teller*, that Catholics had abandoned the governor. In a letter to Seward lamenting the Catholic

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[76] *New York Truth Teller,* February 22, 1840.
[77] *New York Catholic Register*, March 5, 1840.
[78] Lannie, 53-54.

vote, Hughes labeled the *Truth Teller* "vile print" and vowed to "make a holy war" against it.[79] These strong words indicated both the personal stake Hughes had invested in the school controversy, as well as the degree of control Hughes believed he exercised over his flock. Had he not believed he could rein in Denman and the *Truth Teller*'s editorials, he would not have promised to do so to a valued political ally.

The editorial battle between the *Truth Teller* and the *Register* as well as Hughes' meetings with lay Catholics attested to the variety of opinion within the Catholic community over parochial schools. A self-defined Catholic newspaper such as the *Truth Teller* could not have been economically viable if it constantly published opinion pieces that offended its readership. Therefore, its continued existence suggests that there existed Catholics who disagreed with Seward's plan in 1840. Moreover, the fact that the Catholic vote by and large abandoned Seward in the November 1840 election suggests that for many Catholics in November 1840, the school question was not a high political priority.

Following Seward's reelection in 1840, though, the school question gained both publicity and became a *cause célèbre* within New York. As the arguments headed to Albany, the stakes increased for both Protestants and Catholics: Protestants wished to quash what they saw as a growing threat to their nation's religious status quo, while Catholics sought to wrest a first political victory in a country where they had always been a persecuted minority.

Within this climate of escalating debate, did this opposition to Hughes and public money for parochial schools within the newspapers of New York continue? It appears that the answer both yes and no. Unlike its earlier positions, the editorials of the *Truth*

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[79] Ravitch, 58.

Teller generally supported the effort to gain public funding for Catholic parochial schools. However, the cause of this change of heart remains unclear, yet vital to understanding popular Catholic opinion. If the shift in opinion were genuine, then one could guess that there was a genuine homogenizing of Catholic opinion regarding the school question in the early 1840s. However, if the press simply self-censored out of fear of the bishop's wrath, then there may have existed a bona fide difference in Catholic opinion, simply hidden from public view.

It would appear from the general victory for Catholic-supported candidates in the watershed election of 1842 that there was a genuine homogenization of Catholic opinion on the school issue. If that was the case, then how would one explain the documented continuing low attendance of Catholics at parochial schools in the decades following the school controversy?

Part of the answer may lie in the events following the city election in April 1842. After a street gang of Irish Protestants defeated and scattered one comprised of Irish Catholics, the Proetestants continued on to Bishop Hughes' residence and pelted it with stones. The militia was called in to stop the mob, and to stop reprisal attacks from the regrouped Catholics. In this case, the stakes of the election and the attack on their religious leader's house helped to unify Catholics. However, in the years to follow, that allegiance would not be reflected in attendance at parochial schools promoted by Hughes. Thus, it seems Catholics were unified in the face of a common enemy attacking their religion and culture. Yet once the immediate danger passed, they were content for their own private reasons for ignoring the dictates of their bishop.

Another clue can be found in a Catholic convert and a prolific writer named Orestes Brownson. Brownson was born a Protestant, and preached as a Unitarian minister until his very public 1844 conversion on Catholicism. His popular publication, called *Brownson's Quarterly Review*, was published through the 1870s. In it, he assailed the "separatist mentality" created by parochial schools, and claimed that they would keep American Catholics a "foreign colony" within the United States: "Catholics have enough to weight them down in our non-Catholic society without the additional burden of being thought to oppose [common school education]."[8081] Archbishop Hughes (he was ordained an Archbishop in 1850) publicly reprimanded Brownson for his remarks, but Brownson continued, unrepentant.[82] Brownson continued writing, publishing, and speaking on this theme throughout his life. In an address to the graduates of St. John's College in 1856, Brownson suggested that if "the Catholic religion could be presented to the American people through mediums and under auspices more congenial to their feelings and habits, the progress of the church would be greater than it had been." Hughes was also at that graduation ceremony, and took the platform immediately after to refute Brownson's remarks.[83] This continuing struggle of wills demonstrates the continuing Catholic resistance to directives from the Catholic hierarchy. Everyday Catholics could turn to Brownson's writings to justify their attendance of public schools.

Newspapers throughout the controversy indicate that there were not clear divisions between Protestant and Catholics with regard to who supported Hughes and the Maclay Bill. In examining the secular press, one uncovers much anti-Catholic rhetoric,

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[80] Brownson's Quarterly Review, July 1859, 331.
[81] Dolan, 106-108.
[82] Mattice, 53.
[83] Mattice, 81.

but also an ambiguous commitment to freedom of religion. Even among the Protestant newspapers, there appears mild agreement with the Hughes' position that religion and education were connected, but much disagreement on what form that religious instruction should take. Most of all, the Catholic publications of the nineteenth century indicate that there existed clear divisions even among Catholics on the issue of parochial schools, both during the school controversy and in the decades following it.

V. Translating Words into Actions: The Reality of Catholic Parochial Schools in New York in the Decades following the School Controversy

The passage of the Maclay Bill in 1842 can at best be considered a hollow victory for New York's Catholics. They began their political battle with the education system of New York and the Public School Society two years earlier in an effort to extend education funds to parochial schools, and their efforts resulted in an increase in public accountability for public schools through the district system. Despite having demonstrated their political clout as a voting bloc, Catholics failed to gain funding for their parochial schools. Catholic leaders continued to view the public school system as dangerously secular, and increased their public support for parochial schools.[84]

It soon became evident, though, that many of the same reasons that retarded the growth and expansion of Catholic parochial schools prior to 1840 remained present, or even increased in potency after the controversy. Anti-Catholic and nativist sentiment, inflamed by the controversy and continued immigration from Europe, increased in the decades following the controversy. Many of these largely Catholic immigrants brought different cultural attitudes toward the authority of the Church. While some followed Church doctrines unfailingly, others questioned the validity of Church edicts, leading to more ambiguous responses to directives from the Church's leaders. Additionally, many of these immigrants were extremely poor, arriving with little clothing or possessions. Catholic leaders encountered much difficulty convincing poor immigrant families to pay for a separate parochial school system while they already paid taxes to support a public one. Economic difficulties also led parochial schools to have lower teacher salaries, which in turn led to difficulty in recruiting and retaining teachers. Finally, within the

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[84] Lannie, 255.

Catholic hierarchy of New York many leaders found parochial schools to be unnecessary, and objected to being forced by Hughes to implement the parochial school system.

Catholic leaders did not, by any means, begin promoting parochial schools only after the school controversy. Catholic education was a priority for many early Catholic immigrants to the New World seeking religious freedom. The first instance of a Catholic official publicly supporting the establishment of parochial schools came in 1792. Bishop John Carroll of Baltimore, the only bishop in America at the time, wrote in a Pastoral letter to the Catholics in his diocese about the importance of "the virtuous and Christian instruction of youth."[85] Every pastoral in the following half-century spoke in increasingly specific terms about the need for Catholic education. In 1843, the pastoral from the Baltimore diocese (which had at that point been separated from the diocese of New York) stated that Catholic parents were "strictly bound" to "teach their children the truths which God has revealed," and to "see that no interference with the faith of their children be used in public schools."[86]

With the hollow victory of the Maclay Bill's passage, the Catholic leadership's demand for change became more urgent. This increased urgency stemmed from developments not only in New York, but also in Rome. Pope Pius IX led a renewed drive for Catholic education as part of his "relentless campaign against the secularization of society" during the middle decades of the 19th century.[87] The Pope's message found receptive ears among his clergy in the United States, and served only to strengthen the motivations of Catholic leaders to create a large-scale parochial school system. Indeed,

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[85] Quoted in Neil Gerard McCluskey, *Catholic Education in America, A Documentary History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), 46.
[86] McCluskey, 63.
[87] Dolan, 100-102.

Bishop Hughes wrote in his first circular letter in 1850 after becoming an archbishop to "let parochial schools be established and maintained everywhere; the days have come, and the place, in which the school is more necessary than the church."[88] At first glance, the exhaustive efforts Catholics leaders applied to the creation of parochial schools seemed at least moderately successful. By 1854, twenty-eight Catholic schools existed in New York, with 10,061 pupils. Eight years later in 1862, the number of Catholic pupils educated in New York parochial schools had rose a staggering fifty percent, to approximately 15,000. Despite the increased number of students, Catholic schools still only managed to keep pace with the growth of the student population in New York, and their portion of students remained about 20%.

One example of a particularly successful parochial school can be found in Most Holy Redeemer School in New York. Established in a church basement in 1843, it built a new schoolhouse in 1845. Five years later in 1850, the school taught 500 students, and less than fifteen years later in 1864, enrollment had more than tripled to 1550 pupils. One of the reasons for the success of this school was its nominal school fees of only 25 to 50 cents a month, depending on the economic situation of each student's family. Another major reason for its success was its emphasis on bilingual education to attract German-Catholic families intent on retaining their Old World language.[89]

However, the success of Most Holy Redeemer School was an anomaly among parochial schools. While a system of parochial schools did blossom in the middle decades of the nineteenth century, it by no means had the resources to educate even half of New York's Catholic children. One reason for this was the continuing, and in some

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[88] Dolan, 255-256.
[89] Mattice, 125-127.

cases, increasing hostility towards Catholics as the century progressed. The most telling example of growing anti-Catholic sentiment in the United States occurred in Philadelphia. In 1842, the same year that the Maclay Bill was passed, the American Protestant Association (A.P.A.) was formed in Philadelphia. Its founding document set forth its goal "to awaken the attention of the community to the dangers which threaten the liberties, and the public and domestic institutions, of these United States from the assaults of Romanism."[90] Two years later, Philadelphia Archbishop Kendrick attempted to halt the use of the Protestant Bible in public schools, and the A.P.A. encouraged a massive three-day anti-Catholic riot that led to sixteen deaths, the destruction of dozens of Catholics' homes, and the burning of two Catholic churches. The riot quelled only after the militia forcibly restored order in the city.[91] In response to the riot, Bishop Hughes ordered New York City Catholics to protect churches at all cost, and threatened that "if a single Catholic church were burned in New York, the city would become a second Moscow," in reference to Napoleon's ill-fated invasion of Russia decades prior.[92]

Luckily, the mob violence of 1844 was contained to Philadelphia. Anti-Catholic sentiment, on the other hand, remained strong. It was even reflected in academic circles: contemporary historian Dexter Hawkins wrote that Catholic faith concerned only "irrational and absurd dogmas and practices," and that Catholic education was "dwarfing the intellects of the Catholic children" and preparing them only for the "coarser, poorer, and simpler occupations of life."[93]

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[90] Mark Massa, *American Catholic History: A Documentary Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 50.
[91] Dennis Clark, *The Irish in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1973), 21.
[92] Carper and Hunt, 24.
[93] Dexter Hawkins, *The Roman Catholic Church in New York City and Public Land and Public Money* (New York: Phillips and Hunt, 1880), 11-12.

Indeed, even within public schools, Catholic children of immigrants found their cultures and customs under attack. In the decades following the school controversy, public schools in some ways only intensified their efforts to remove Old World influences from the classroom. While no longer using books that openly attacked Catholicism, education policy makers sought to acculturate immigrant children nonetheless. The New York Superintendent of Schools in 1854 openly declared that one of the goals of public education was the assimilation of immigrant children.[94]

In this harsh social environment Hughes and other Catholic leaders tried to institute a large-scale parochial school system. These leaders encountered resistance not only from outside the church but from within as well. Immigrant parents often supported their children learning the culture of their new country. Many of these immigrants had left their country seeking to escape poverty, and believed faster acculturation for their children would increase their odds for economic success.[95] In fact, many immigrants put little value in preserving their old world traditions, and therefore disagreed with the "separatist mentality" created by a separate parochial school system outside of mainstream American society.[96] One aspect of their old world culture that many immigrants retained was a sense of anti-clericalism, especially among German Catholic immigrants migrating after the failed 1848 revolution. These immigrants were very liberal and accustomed to limiting the influence of their pastors by ignoring their directives, and carried the tradition across the Atlantic. In order to both save money on school tuition and acculturate their children, these parents chose to send their children to

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[94] Mattice, 66.
[95] Dolan, 110-111.
[96] Ibid, 106-108.

public school despite the pleas of the clergy.[97] In what could be considered a case of a few bad apples spoiling the bunch, other American Catholics followed suit, rejecting as false their pastors' claims that their children's spiritual welfare would be under attack in public schools.[98]

Additionally, the ward system instituted by the Maclay Bill was able to curb anti-Catholic influences in some instances. In wards where Catholics were a plurality and Catholics elected sympathetic commissioners, inspectors, and trustees who saw to it that reading from the Protestant Bible in class was halted. In these areas, public schools became far more palatable to local Catholics, who subsequently flocked to them rather than pay more for a parochial school education. Competition from parochial schools was so intense that it led to the shutdown of some parochial schools.[99]

Economic factors were even more significant than either cultural or social motives in slowing the growth of parochial schools. Prior to the school controversy of 1840-1842, New York's Catholic schools had been in dire economic straits. Often classrooms were located in cramped church basements, leading to overcrowding. Teachers were difficult to recruit, train, and retain. Worse, the schools often failed to provide appropriate resources for their students.[100] Hughes himself acknowledged that the economic necessities of parochial schools would require him to "tolerate the attendance of our poor children at [public] schools" until there was enough resources to "erect schools of our own for their exclusively Catholic training."[101]

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[97] Mattice, 98-99.
[98] Mattice, 105.
[99] Ibid, 106-108.
[100] Dolan, 102.
[101] Lannie, 251.

Due to the poverty of many of New York's Catholics, the money to create a large-scale parochial school system was difficult to obtain. One effect of the ongoing money shortage was the continued difficulty of recruiting appropriate numbers of teachers. Many young teachers worked only briefly at parochial schools before taking their training and experience to public schools, where they would be better paid and receive more job security.[102] Simultaneously, the rapid population growth of New York caused the number of children within the city to triple between 1850 and 1865, leading to teacher-to-student rations of 1 to 60 or even 1 to 75. Moreover, many Catholics questioned the qualifications of the religious men and women who taught their children. One Catholic remarked that "just because a sister or a nun wears a veil, it by no means follows that she is competent to teach," and added that it is "what is in the head, and not what is on the head" that determines her qualification to teach.[103]

Besides contributing to the teacher shortage, the economic constraints of New York's Catholics caused a severe reduction in attendance. Even at the previously mentioned Most Holy Redeemer School, many of the families were unable to pay the 25 cents per month tuition and were unable to enroll their children.[104] A contemporary Catholic historian noted that the lack of money required many Catholic churches to borrow vast sums of money at "ruinous" interest rates simply to provide a place of worship.[105] Many Catholics saw the Hughes's policy of parochial schools as a "second tax," because they already paid for public schools through their taxes. When regular

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[102] Dolan, 106-108.
[103] Dennis Ryan, *Beyond the Ballot Box: A Social History of the Boston Irish, 1845-1917* (New Jersey: Associated University Presses, 1983), 62.
[104] Mattice, 125-127.
[105] Reverend J.R. Bayley, *The Catholic Church on the Island of New York* (New York: The Catholic Publication Society, 1870), 143.

church collections were not enough to keep schools financially secure, some New York Churches instituted additional collections specifically for their schools. Dubbed "ten cents collections," these additional collections highlighted the financial insecurity hanging over many parochial schools.

Many schools had to close or turn down potential students due to lack of funds. For example, one school had to wait for decades until it had saved enough funds to expand, no doubt turning away many potential students along the way, and sending them to public schools. Another school, Transfiguration Church school opened in 1827, only to promptly close in 1830. It opened again in 1836, only to close down again in 1851 due to financial insolvency. Some churches were simply financially unable to provide a church and a school, per the bishop's request. Frustrated, one priest simply marched his students out of their school to the nearest public school, where he promptly enrolled them.[106]

The frustrated priest was not the only clergyman dissatisfied with Hughes's directive for all churches to have parochial schools. The Pastor of St. Stephen's Church in New York, Rev. Doctor Edward McGlynn, felt that public schools were the "pride and glory of Americans" and prided himself on having attended one as a child and having reached adulthood with his faith intact. His story, he reasoned, offered "living proof" that public schools did not destroy Catholic faith. He supported a law limiting religious groups to "works of charity, select private schools, and Sunday school," and even wanted a constitutional amendment to forbid public funds to private schools, as well as to ban

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[106] Dolan, 106-108.

Bible-reading in schools. McGlynn also led a small group of priests who believed the church should focus on building more churches and abandon parochial schools.[107]

McGlynn and his supporters in the clergy were not Hughes's only opposition. Once ordained an archbishop, Hughes attempted to implement his system of parochial schools in Rochester and Buffalo. The bishops there, fearing that Hughes in fact wanted to gain control of their economic assets and in turn gain more political sway in their diocese, opposed the Maclay Bill and Hughes's subsequent educational dictates. Hughes in reply stated that the Catholics of Rochester and Buffalo were "irreligious and worthless beings" and labeled them "the pretended Catholics of Buffalo and Rochester."[108] In response, Bishop Le Couteulx of Buffalo wrote a letter to Hughes stating that he believed that the Maclay Bill has "no other object in view but to make [Hughes] more wealthy in giving [Hughes] the exclusive control and administration of Church property." Furthermore, he claims Hughes is "bent upon the acquirements …of wealth and temporal power" rather than the expansion of the church. Most telling is his accusation that the bill would give Hughes "a political power so great, that no person could be elected to any function without your consent."[109] The example of Le Couteulx provides insight into the struggle for power occurring behind the scenes during the expansion of parochial schools.

Despite all these challenges, the parochial schools of New York managed to increase their enrollment in proportion to the rapidly rising population. The church failed, however, to increase the proportion of Catholic children attending their schools. Even the *Catholic Register*, a paper explicitly aligned with the Catholic Church, wrote

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[107] Mattice, 92.
[108] William Le Couteulx, *Letter to the Right Rev. John Hughes* (Buffalo, 1852).
[109] Ibid.

that ½ to ¾ of all students in common schools had Catholic parents.[110] Historians generally concur that that figure held steady throughout the century. The rapid pace of immigration, combined with the poverty of many Catholics in New York caused parochial schools to fail to increase the proportion of Catholic children they educated. Indeed, a Catholic observer writing in New York in 1853 believed that the "two hundred Catholics" of 1785 were better provided for than the two hundred thousand who now dwell within the boundaries of the city of New York," and that number of priests, schools, and churches were "entirely inadequate to the wants of our Catholic population."[111]

[110] Dolan, 106.
[111] Bayley, 160.

VI. Conclusion

While Catholic parochial schools failed to educate even a majority of New York's Catholics, Hughes's emphasis on creating a large-scale parochial school system vastly changed the educational landscape of America. Before 1840, New Yorkers had two options for schooling: expensive private schools, or common schools dominated by the Public School Society. Orphan schools and other small charity schools did exist, but only on a small scale. The school controversy and the introduction of parochial schools vastly changed the options for children's education. Small, private schools continued to be the educational choice for the small upper-class. For the working-class, as well as the small but growing middle-class of the mid-nineteenth century, the introduction of parochial schools gave parents choice of where their children went to school.

The introduction of the parochial school system meant more involvement of parents in their children's education. While the was P.S.S. responsible only to the Common Council, the community directly voted for commissioners, inspectors and trustees, and held each of them individually responsible for education. Additionally, the introduction of choice for parents meant that public and parochial schools competed to attract students, as seen in the German instruction at Most Holy Redeemer School that appealed to children of German immigrants. The parochial school system has survived until the present day, offering working- and middle-class parents opportunities to have more input in their child's education and avoid government funded schools.

Another effect of the school controversy and its aftermath can be seen in the political arena. The watershed election of 1841 realigned politics in New York City. After the election no political candidate could ignore the Catholic vote and stand a chance

of winning. Furthermore, Bishop Hughes's involvement fundamentally shifted the relationship between religion and politics in the United States. Rather than preaching on the sidelines, Bishop Hughes explicitly endorsed and campaigned for candidates, not as a voter but as a religious leader. This set the precedent of deep religious involvement in politics that exists to this day.

Another important precedent the controversy was that it demonstrated that immigrants could greatly affect their adopted country. Catholic immigrants were deeply troubled by readings from the Protestant Bible, Protestant hymns, and offensive passages in the textbooks, and other examples of Protestant bias in the classroom. Rather than allow it to continue, in 1840 many Catholics of the city jumped on the opportunity presented by Governor Seward to claim a portion of the state's school fund for their parochial schools. Though they failed to attain their goal, they did gain the right to vote directly for the administrators of their school districts, effectively working towards new compromises with Protestants with regard to the books used and the lesson plans of public schools.

On the other hand, the school controversy created an opportunity for Catholics and immigrants to partially withdraw from American society and retreat into more traditional parochial schools. This form of educational separation remains an option open to many religions groups today, and allows many groups to immigrate without fear of their children becoming too "American" in religion or culture.

The experience of Catholics in the decades following the school controversy also demonstrates the limits of the parochial school system. Many immigrants were eager for their children to enter into American society, and so brushed aside their priests' warnings

of threats to their religion. One of the biggest reasons Catholic families were unable to take advantage of parochial schools was financial difficulty. Entire schools blinked into and out of existence based on fluctuating financial situations.

Finally, the school controversy illustrates the volatility of urban life in America in the mid-nineteenth century, especially among immigrants. Besides the constant pressure of poverty, the poor housing many immigrants faced, there was also intense religious and social strife. It is impressive that Bishop Hughes was able to unify Catholics to the extent that he did amid such pressures, and therefore not surprising that many Catholics either were unable to enroll their children in parochial schools or chose not to.

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